

# Nixon blockades the Post

WASHINGTON,  
Wednesday.

ONE OF the most colourful and brutal feuds of the next four years could well be the war, now escalating, fast, between President Nixon and the Washington Post.

White House aides are talking openly about how to "screw" the paper by blockading it, starving it of news and sealing off access to sources in the know.

Mr Nixon mined the waters of its supremacy by giving a gorgeous post-election interview, packed with headlines and revelations, to the Post's only rival newspaper, the Evening Star.

This week, in a move some are calling "the Scrooge manoeuvre," he decided to bar all Washington Post reporters from covering the festive round of Christmas parties at the White House.

The Post has long been a source of slights and nuisances to Mr Nixon. But the final breach came this autumn when two young reporters, digging into the Watergate affair, came up with a mass of unsavoury evidence that highly placed members of the Nixon staff had been involved in political

sabotage, spying and the crude forging of documents in order to discredit leading Democrats in an election year.

Behind a facade of non-chalance, I detect a mood of distinct unease in the shiny new offices of the Post on 15th Street. Four years of siege like this could create a news famine at the paper which may erode its popularity, leaving it with little but a well-developed sense of moral superiority.

## Angry

On the face of it, the Washington Post is fat and flourishing. The Sunday edition runs to nearly 200 pages, not counting assorted magazines and comics.

The paper has undoubted strengths. It is an excellent local paper, perhaps the best chronicle of small-town affairs in America. Coverage of the arts, such as they are, is lively. The leader page, embellished with the angry cartoon of Herblock, is written with authority and verve.

But, for some time it seems to me, the mystique of the Post has been wearing perilously thin and its hopes of becoming a great national newspaper increasingly misplaced. The Nixon offensive has hit the paper in its weakest spot, coverage of the Nixon administration itself.

Week by week, as the story

of Vietnam peace diplomacy unfolded, the Post has been worried by the superior newsgathering resources of the New York Times.

It was the Times which disclosed the first signal of the dramatic peace effort—a cutback in U.S. air strikes over North Vietnam and first published a summary of the draft agreement with Hanoi. On Monday of the week, the Times set the seal on a string of scoops: a detailed report from its Washington Bureau of steps Mr Nixon was considering to hasten a ceasefire, including the further mining of Haiphong harbour.

The best the Post could manage was a circumstantial story, late in the day, of a shift in American bombing policy from an AP writer in Saigon.

Nothing better illustrates the strange inner mechanisms of the Washington Post than the affair of the Pentagon papers, perhaps the biggest scoop of the last four years.

On that Sunday in June 1971, while the Times led its front page with the first, devastating excerpt from the Pentagon papers, a classified account of the origins and escalation of the Vietnam war, the Post splashed an unflattering photograph of Tricia Nixon's wedding, the result of a petty feud with the White House over who should be allowed to cover the ceremony.

Days later, the Post finally published some excerpts of its own from the Pentagon papers, and after a contest in court fulsomely congratulated itself on the achievement.

Possibly Mr Nixon knows an easy target when he sees one. The Post sometimes seems dangerously prone to complacency and immune to self-doubt.

"Our philosophy," a lofty leader writer once remarked to me, "is that no event can really be said to have happened until it is published in the Washington Post."

I sometimes wonder how long that philosophy would survive in the bracing climate of Fleet Street.